Hannictober 2024

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Hannictober 2024

by Dovesummer

Summary

Prompt Fills for Hannictober 2024. Starting late and not sure how many I'll do. I'll update the rating if necessary as I go along, as well as adding tags

Pumpkin Spice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will never woke late by anyone else's standards, but somehow he was always up later than Hannibal. This particular morning was no exception, and he wandered blearily down the stairs and into their kitchen, drawn by the smell of coffee.

Hannibal was busy making something else, but it wasn't until Will had taken several sips of coffee - some decadent blend that Hannibal got directly from a farmer in town - that Will registered what it was.

"Pancakes?" he asked. Hannibal smiled at Will's surprise, but before he could respond Will asked another question: "Why do I smell cinnamon?"

Hannibal tutted. "It's not cinnamon you smell, Will." Will raised an eyebrow. His sense of smell was nothing compared to Hannibal's but he knew what cinnamon smelled like. "Or rather," Hannibal continued, "it is not *only* cinnamon you smell."

"Fine." Will's tone was terse but he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, sensing Hannibal's eyes on him and the warmth of Hannibal's pleasure radiating through him. Hannibal loved when Will indulged him. Will still liked to put up a fuss - *for old time's sake,* he thought to himself - but he'd been indulging Hannibal too long for either of them to believe he didn't enjoy giving in.

"Cloves," Will added, after taking several deep breaths. "Cloves, and … nutmeg?"

"Very good Will," Hannibal's voice rumbled in his ear, deep and throaty. His accent was always thicker in the morning. Will shivered. He didn't need to open his eyes to know Hannibal was standing much closer than he had been only moments ago. He could feel the other man's heat. He leaned forward, closer to Hannibal, intending to take in the scent of him, when something struck him.

"There's something else," he said, frowning.

"Clever boy," Hannibal said, knowing exactly the reaction those words would elicit. Will whimpered softly. The response was near Pavlovian at this point - not that it bothered Will. Not anymore. Hannibal's lips grazed the skin beneath his earlobe before pulling away. "Can you identify it?"

Will opened his eyes and looked at Hannibal, irritated. Hannibal was smiling at him, an annoyingly smug look that made Will want to both punch him and kiss him breathless.

"You do like to wind me up," Will said. The heat singing through his veins had nothing to do with the coffee he was still holding. Hannibal's eyes danced. "I don't know what it is."

“Allspice.” Hannibal lifted a small bowl where he’d combined the spices.

Will frowned. *Cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, all spice.* “Wait. Are you making *pumpkin spice?*”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I sent Alana a card this morning.”

He sent Alana cards periodically, at what appeared to be irregular intervals but, knowing Hannibal, probably related to something specific. Will hadn’t asked. His feelings about Alana were still complicated. He had no intention of intervening, but his participation in Hannibal’s campaign of fear was passive at best.

Hannibal had gone back to stirring and Will looked more closely at the bowl. The batter was … orange.

“Ok.” Will drew out the word, still staring at the odd-colored pancakes. He sniffed. Pumpkin. “And for some reason that made you want to make - what? Pumpkin spice pancakes?”

“The card inspired me.”

Will laughed as Hannibal’s reasoning became clear. “You sent her *that* card? It seems so unlike you.”

Hannibal hummed in amusement. The postcard was one Will had picked up because he’d known Hannibal would hate it: a dancing latte cup with the words “It’s Pumpkin Spice Season!” in bright orange letters across the top.

“I’m certain she’ll know it’s from me.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Of course she will. That ridiculous penmanship of yours would give you away even if nothing else did.” She would also know Will picked it out and assume he was a more active participant than he was. He should probably feel irritated about that but when he tried to summon the emotion all he felt was amusement.

“Aesthetic is important in all things, Will,” Hannibal chastised, but he still had that small smile on his face. Will was smiling back, watching Hannibal sprinkle the spice mixture into the batter. “The fascination with pumpkin spice is a singularly American trait.”

“Is it?”

“I have found it to be, yes.”

“You thought I might be missing it?” Will tilted his head slightly, taking Hannibal in. There was a hint of color across the other man’s cheeks. “And you like pleasing me,” Will added softly.

“I do.” The emotionlessness of Hannibal’s response gave him away. He focused on measuring out a precise amount of batter and pouring it into the pan, spreading it evenly into a perfect circle.

Aesthetics. But Will had to admire the elegance and precision.

Hannibal still wasn’t looking at him and Will cleared his throat.

“What if I told you I was never really a fan of pumpkin spice?” He asked. He managed to keep enough of the tease out of his voice that Hannibal turned around swiftly and stared at him, eyes intent. Will shrugged. “I mean, it’s fine, I guess.”

Will bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as Hannibal’s jaw actually dropped. It might have been due to surprise, but the flush still visible on his cheeks and the parted lips were so inviting that Will couldn’t resist stepping forward and pressing his own lips to Hannibal’s, his tongue darting between them.

Before Hannibal could reciprocate Will pulled away, lowering his eyes. “But you know I’ll eat anything you feed me.” He heard Hannibal swallow and he smiled at the floor. Sniffed. “Careful Hannibal. That one’s burning.”

He laughed and sipped his coffee as Hannibal turned back to the pancake and swore.

Chapter End Notes

The internet tells me Pumpkin Spice blend always includes cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. Allspice is optional (but I imagine Hannibal would like to spice it up (hahaha my puns are so awesomely terrible)). Apparently people sometimes add ginger and even black pepper. Like Will I'm not exactly a fan (well, he's teasing Hannibal though, so is he or not? only Will Graham knows for sure) but I sort of want to try making my own now.

Ghostly Voices

Chapter Notes

ack, sorry, I have this all in the same document and I didn't realize I grabbed everything when I first posted. edited so that this is only chapter two (oops!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal stood at the edge of the moors, staring out of the rolling hills. They were always at their most stunningly beautiful when the heather was in bloom, the fields of purple among the greens and yellows the most picturesque image of the English countryside.

Hannibal had not missed it. But he had missed Will. He'd missed his friend desperately. Three years of not speaking had felt like an eternity. They had been three hollow years, living in the city. He'd made no attempts to make friends there, living instead a solitary life. He had engaged in the occasional liaison, the type that never last more than an evening, and Hannibal was aware that each of his partners had certain physical similarities.

Yet none of them compared to the image in his heart and his mind. His love like a brand, something he could never shake. Whether the feeling was reciprocated or not, there could be no other for him.

He held the letter he'd finally sent to Will in his hand. It was well-worn, the paper soft and creased from multiple foldings.

My dearest Will,

I regret our years of not speaking. I regret our argument. In truth I no longer recall its specifics -

this was a lie, Hannibal remembered word for word the angry statements he'd made to his friend, though he wished he *had* forgotten -

but I do know it was foolish and childish. As I have been, in leaving you and in remaining silent all this time.

I miss you. I am coming home. I hope that you will see me upon my return. I hope that we can speak and resolve our differences.

Ever yours,

Hannibal

“He could have written to you,” Chiyoh said, approaching from behind him. Hannibal doubted she could see the letter in his hand from her angle, but she didn’t need to. Chiyoh knew him well, and knew he would be rereading the words.

Words that had come too late. News of Will’s disappearance in the moors had crossed with his letter to Will in the mail, and Hannibal had only learned that his friend was gone when he arrived.

“I told him I did not wish to hear from him,” Hannibal said quietly.

“He still could have written.” Chiyoh placed a delicate hand on his shoulder. Hannibal looked her over. She was poised and elegant, deadly if she wished to be - a far better shot with a rifle than Hannibal, in truth - and always, always his protector.

He folded the letter once more, putting it back in his jacket pocket where it remained, over his heart. Chiyoh blamed Will for his sadness, but that was unfair. Hannibal bore the weight of their silence in his soul and he needed to set things right. He needed Will to know that he had not meant it - not a word of it. That Will was divine and that Hannibal loved him above all others. And would, in any way Will would allow.

Despite Will’s engagement. Despite Will’s marriage to another. Hannibal could love him from afar. Could love without touching, or feeling Will in his arms. He had one precious memory of it that he could revisit again and again and be sated - or as close to sated as he would be allowed.

And yet now, even that is marred.

Hannibal had not been to see his wife. He could not bring himself to do it. He did not wish to commiserate with her - not when she doubtless could not understand the depth of Hannibal’s own feeling and the way Will’s loss cut into his soul.

Chiyoh’s hand eventually left his shoulder as Hannibal continued to stare across the land. He was not dead, only missing, he told himself, but it had been more than a week and the moors, though beautiful, were also deadly.

And yet, if anyone could survive it was his Will.

But why, then, had he not returned?

*

Hannibal woke that night to a tapping on his window. A tree branch, no doubt, and yet the tapping felt too regular for a branch being pushed by the wind. It seemed to come in threes: *taptaptap,* a pause, and then again, *taptaptap*.

Hannibal stood, frowning, and made his way to the window, pulling back the curtain to stare out into the night.

There was nothing, only his own distorted reflection in the night.

The branches of the tree did not seem close enough to knock against the glass, but perhaps the wind had been stronger moments ago. He tried hard not to think about fingertips tapping on the glass - the way Will used to when he climbed the trellis and asked for entry. As boys they would spend hours together late at night reading and giggling by candlelight, daring each other to run out into the moors at night.

They never went very far, but Will had always ventured further out than Hannibal dared.

He closed his eyes, aching with memory. When he opened them, for the briefest of moments he was certain his saw Will's face on the other side of the window. Not the boyish face he remembered, but one slightly older, stubble on his chin and cheeks and a finer, more chiseled appearance. The kind that came with age, as it stripped the body of youth.

The slight changes that might occur over the course of three years.

"Hannibal."

Hannibal stepped quickly over to the window, throwing it open. He was certain he'd heard Will's voice, but there was nothing; only the soft breeze of a warm night.

Hannibal left the window open as he made his way back to his bed. Chiyoh would not appreciate it. They'd been raised with the same superstitions; stories of ghosts wandering the moors and begging for entry to the homes of the living. Ghostly voices that could lure you to your death.

She believed the stories. Hannibal did not. He had a healthy fear of the moors, but only inasmuch as he was aware of the bogs hiding in plain sight. Bogs that could suck a man down and hold him there for centuries before spitting him back out. When he was a young man there had been a corpse found at the edge of a neighbor's property - a boy they thought recently murdered until it was determined the body was several centuries old.

Will had been fascinated, learning all he could about the subject. Others had called Will morbid or strange, but Hannibal had loved watching the way Will's blue eyes seemed to light from within when he spoke on the subject.

He'd never asked Will if he believed the stories of ghosts.

With a deep breath and a sigh Hannibal made to close the window, but movement at the edge of his vision stopped him.

There was a figure standing at the edge of the moors, just outside their property.

Will? It was a foolish hope, but Hannibal's heart thudded powerfully against his ribs. He made his way quietly down the stairs and out the rear door. The figure had not moved.

A shadowed moved across the moon, and as light peeked out from behind the cloud Hannibal was certain the figure was Will. What on earth was he doing? Why was he here, now?

"Hannibal," came the quiet voice. The voice of his dearest friend. It was Will. It had to be.

But a moment later the figure was gone, the wind moving the brush that had appeared, from a distance, to be a man.

And yet Hannibal was so certain he'd heard Will's voice.

"Will," he said softly to the moors. "Come back to me."

There was no answer.

*

For several days the tapping did not recur. Hannibal slept restlessly. What he'd seen had been a dream, or perhaps a waking dream, but either way: he had not seen Will. Nor had there been any news. Gossip in town said his wife was distraught.

Hannibal's own distress was not commented upon. After all, who could know the depths of it when Hannibal and Will had been childhood friends and nothing more? They'd grown apart when Hannibal left.

No one was aware of the way they'd kissed behind Will's father's barn, limbs twined together or of the nights Hannibal had slept next to him, neither of them quite daring to bridge the last gap in their closeness, for many nights before that one.

Eventually Hannibal gave up his attempts to sleep, instead sitting at his desk and waiting, hoping to hear the tapping again. Hoping for something that was not to be. And yet terribly, terribly aware that if he had indeed seen Will that night it was because he was lost to this world forever.

*

Hannibal had fallen asleep at his desk when he heard the tapping once more. He jolted awake, staring at the window. There was nothing: only his reflection in the night. He stared, but the tapping did not recur and he was forced to consider that it had not actually happened, but was nothing more than the imaginings of an addled mind.

Still, after several long quiet minutes he made his way to the window and opened it.

The air was cooler than it had been only a week prior, and Hannibal braced himself on the windowpane, peering out into the night. It was more to satisfy himself that he was imagining things, that his longing for Will was festering into something foolish. He did not expect to see a dark figure walking the moors.

A ghost. He shook his head. There was no such thing, but Hannibal was certain he was not imagining the figure. It strode purposely across the land, it's gait familiar. This was not brush moving in the wind.

"Will," he called softly into the night, and he was certain the figure paused. Certain, even from the distance and in the low light of the moon that the figure was looking his direction.

Waiting.

Hannibal grabbed a dressing gown for warmth and hurried from the house. The figure had not moved, and Hannibal felt a thrill of fear. Had he once again mistaken himself? Would the figure disappear with the wind, nothing more than a mirage in the night?

But as he moved closer he became more certain it was a man. And not any man but Will - *his* Will.

“Hannibal,” Will greeted him. His voice was pleased, and Hannibal felt weak with it.

“Where have you been?” Hannibal asked and was instantly sorry for the brusqueness. But Will only smiled, sensing the concern beneath the question. Will seemed to have a knack for understanding the meaning beneath things.

Except, maybe, for the night they’d argued and Hannibal had left.

Or maybe Will had understood that too.

“Wandering.” There was a note of sadness to Will’s voice.

“You should come in,” Hannibal said. “People are worried.” *I’m worried*, he thought. The fear for his friend had not dissipated despite Will standing before him.

“I cannot,” Will said, looking away.

Hannibal looked him over, taking him in. The moon shone down on him and he looked beautiful. Otherworldly.

“I’m dreaming,” Hannibal murmured.

“No.” Will reached for Hannibal, placing a hand on his cheek. Will’s hand was warm and Hannibal placed his own over it, closing his eyes and swallowing.

“Let me come with you then,” Hannibal said, pleading. He reopened his eyes. Will was looking at him intently, blue eyes bright. Will said nothing. Instead he pulled his hand gently from beneath Hannibal’s and turned, walking deeper into the moors. Helpless, Hannibal followed, wandering deeper than he ever had into the hills of the land behind his home. Wandering further and further into the dark, guided only by Will’s light. Eventually Will paused, glancing behind him and extending a hand.

Hannibal reached for it eagerly and they moved forward, together.

Chapter End Notes

It's been ages since I read Wuthering Heights and if I'm being strictly honest I don't remember being that impressed by it (sorry to everyone who loves it!) but for whatever

reason when I was trying to come up with something for this prompt I kept thinking of Catherine's ghost, tapping on the window and asking to be let in.

In other words: if this has kind of a Wuthering Heights vibe, well, that's why lol.

If I ever have time this is an idea/story I'd like to expand on.

Witches Sabbath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had been following the doctor for days: watching as he left his home at night and wandered into the forest and watching as he met with other people from around the village, exchanging whispers and surreptitious glances. He'd even sat outside the man's house and watched him eat a time or two, which had been … interesting. Dr. Frederick Chilton was a bit pretentious. He liked to light candles and make what he probably considered to be a fancy meal.

Will supposed it was, considering the amount of butter that went into his cooking, but in truth Will didn't find the results all that interesting. Which was not to say his own stomach hadn't rumbled a time or two watching the doctor eat.

Tonight, however, Chilton had forgone eating. Instead, he'd dressed himself in all black and waited until well after nightfall before stealing out of his own front door and into the night.

Tailing the man was made more difficult by the emptiness of the streets, but only slightly. It simply never occurred to Chilton that anyone might be following him, therefore it didn't occur to him to be on guard against it. Plus, Will was good at blending into the dark. Better than Chilton, despite his dark clothing.

Near the edge of town Chilton met up with several others, some of whom were similarly dressed in dark colored clothing, others wearing long black robes. Will remained still in the shadows as they gathered and then slowly began to make their way into the woods.

He spared a glance back down the street. There was no one in sight, not even a constable.

Not that a constable would be of any use. Will tried going to them immediately after Beverly disappeared a week earlier, but they had dismissed him. Witches might exist, but not here.

Will was certain that was not true. And now, the evidence was before his eyes, slipping slowly into the woods for their witches' sabbath.

Will took a deep, silent breath and followed, heart in his throat.

He was lucky he knew the woods well, often venturing into them to hunt or to fish in the nearby stream. And yet as he followed the group he realized they were venturing into a part of the woods he'd never explored; an area where the trees grew thicker and darker.

They were not loud, but luckily for him they were not quiet either, and they didn't notice a lone man following them on near silent feet.

Eventually they neared the light of a bonfire, burning in the center of a large open circle in the trees. Will stopped well outside of the area. It did not appear to be man-made – Will couldn't see any evidence of trees being removed to create the clearing – but as though it had simply grown that way. Inside the circle of trees stones were placed in a slightly smaller circle, with a large flat stone in the middle, just behind the fire. An altar, Will assumed. He half expected Beverly to be strapped to it, but she was not.

Will stood behind the trunk of a large tree and watched, keeping as quiet as possible.

The attendees greeted each other with pleasure: clasping hands and embracing. Although Will was far enough away that he couldn't make out the words, their conversation wasn't hushed, merely muffled by the growth of the trees. It was animated and the tone of it was … pleasant.

In fact, if not for the setting and strange clothing, Will might have thought it was any other gathering of friends. Except that it was occurring at midnight in the middle of a forest.

And, entering from the opposite end of the clearing, was a tall man wearing the head of a goat.

With him came Beverly. Unlike the others gathered, Beverly was dressed in white.

Like a bride. The thought came unbidden and Will gasped. He glanced around, furtively, but no one was looking in his direction.

Crouching low to the ground, he began to move closer.

Beverly was being guided toward the alter. She didn't appear to be fighting but she was moving slowly, and Will wondered if she was drugged or in a trance. What were they doing to her? What were they *going* to do to her?

Despite the speed her movements appeared purposeful and lacking in fear. Will watched with wide eyes as she laid herself across the large stone altar. The man wearing the goat head raised a knife, holding it over her chest.

"No!" Will screamed. It was a fool's errand, but he was unable to stop himself from racing out of the dark and into the middle of the clearing. "Beverly!"

Beverly sat up, a look of shock on her face. She did not appear drugged, or in a trance, but her eyes were red and swollen like she'd been crying. The gathering had gone silent, all eyes turned to Will. The man with the goat head had stilled, holding the dagger over Beverly's chest.

Beverly was watching him, her eyes sad.

"Do you know what you're interrupting, Mr. Graham?" It was Chilton who asked, but Will could feel all eyes on him.

"No need to be upset." The smooth, softly accented voice came from the man wearing the goat head. He set the dagger down on the rock next to Beverly and raised both hands to

remove the head covering.

Beneath the mask was a relatively normal looking man - sandy blonde hair, high cheekbones, lips pursed in thought - except for his eyes, which were brown but overshadowed by a deep shade of red. He took a step toward Will, and Will felt his breath catch in his chest. He glanced at Beverly, who was staring at him in shock.

“You came to save your friend?” The man asked. Will nodded, swallowing against his dry throat. His palms were sweating but he didn’t dare move to wipe them against his pants. He felt pinned under the man’s eyes. “Curious.”

Will remained silent, and the group around them had stilled, watching the exchange.

“Would you take her place, to save her?” The man asked. Will glanced over the man’s shoulder at Beverly once more. Her mouth was open in a small ‘o’ and she was shaking her head. *No*, she mouthed. But Will thought of the times she’d spoken to him when no one else would, the times she listened when no one else would.

The times she stopped by his tiny home on the edge of town simply to see if he was ok.

He nodded.

“Very well,” the man said thoughtfully. “I accept.”

The man moved with an inhuman speed, grabbing the dagger and plunging it into Will’s chest. Will heard Beverly scream. He looked down at himself. It had happened so fast. *It hardly even hurts*, Will thought, before he succumbed to darkness.

Chapter End Notes

No, Will doesn't die. He was sacrificed to the devil (Hannibal) but only to be the devil's consort.

So maybe he does dies, sort of, but that's not the end of him. This just seemed like a good stopping point for a prompt fill. Especially one I had a helluva time coming up with something for!

Oh, also a note on the butter comment: at various times in history butter has been very scarce and/or expensive and I sort of imagine Chilton seeing "expensive" as "fancy".

Headless Horseman

Chapter Notes

A Legend of Sleepy Hollow inspired prompt response ...

Updating this at my lunch break and hoping I can start catching up. Maybe lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Did you know that Hannibal refused to fight me for your honor?" Matthew said, winking at Hannibal before turning the full force of his unctuous smile on Will. The fingertips of Matthew's right hand rested lightly on Will's forearm as he spoke and Hannibal had the urge to grab that hand and break each of the 27 bones that made it. He resisted it. Barely.

He might not have, had he not caught Will's amusement in his brief glance at him. The sparkle in those blue eyes soothed Hannibal and he allowed the urge to pass, despite how satisfying it would be to hear the crack of bone beneath the skin of the offensive appendage.

"Did he now," Will murmured at Matthew, his eyes wide and lips slightly curled.

"*I* would have fought for you, of course," Matthew continued.

Will hummed, sipping his cider, his eyes darting about the room at the other guests milling about. Will was not an instinctive host, but he did his best to be an attentive one. "I appreciate that Matty," he said distractedly, eyes stilling on someone across the room. "But I am quite capable of fighting my own battles." He gave Hannibal a meaningful look (it felt meaningful), flashed Matthew a smile and uttered a soft "excuse me" before heading to the other side of the room.

Hannibal's eyes trailed Will and the guest he was headed toward: Alana. Hannibal suppressed a snarl.

It was to be expected, of course, that the Grahams would invite marriage prospects to their fall party. Nonetheless it rankled to be around so many rivals for Will's affections.

It rankled more acutely that Hannibal could not be entirely certain where Will's affections lay. Will had *some* affection for him, Hannibal could be certain of at least that much. But just how much was questionable from the soft smile Will was currently bestowing on Alana.

Hannibal clenched his fists and turned away, seeking a beverage or some other form of distraction. He found it in the town's other doctor, Dr. Frederick Chilton, who was lounging against the wall near the bar.

"Hannibal Lecter," Frederick said. "Enjoying the party?"

“Yes,” Hannibal lied smoothly. “It’s been a pleasure meeting more of the townsfolk.”

“Mmm,” was Frederick’s only response. Hannibal had been raised better than to allow the conversation to drop, and he was gifted at small talk. But when he opened his mouth, he found he lacked the desire to begin yet another meaningless conversation. If Frederick was willing to allow them to lapse into silence, why not simply follow suit? They sipped from their cups, quietly watching the crowd - though if anyone had paid them any mind it would have been obvious that it was not the *crowd* they were watching so much as Will, who was still bent in quiet conversation with Alana.

“I always thought those two would end up together,” Frederick observed after some time. Hannibal swallowed his growl with another sip of cider. “Will used to chase after her when we were children, always wanting her attention.”

“And did she enjoy the chase?” Hannibal asked, swallowing more cider in an attempt to rid himself of the sour taste in his mouth.

“She sought him out in turn,” Frederick said. He looked at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. “For a moment after you arrived, I began to wonder.”

Hannibal felt a delicate hum of pleasure run through him at the statement, but he kept his face impassive and pursed his lips. Frederick chuckled and laid a gentle hand on Hannibal’s arm, mirroring Matthew’s action with Will earlier.

Hannibal, likewise, experienced a recurrence of his own earlier reaction. He stifled it once more. This gathering was beginning to wear on his nerves, and he’d had almost no time with Will. Frederick was looking at him with an expression the other man no-doubt thought earnest.

“No need to be coy, Hannibal. Who here *wouldn’t* be intrigued by the foreign doctor who’s relocated to our sleepy little hollow? I certainly am.”

“I’m flattered,” Hannibal said flatly.

“I suppose I should be grateful Will’s interest in you appears to have been short-lived.”

At the other end of the room Will had leaned forward, speaking softly in Alana’s ear. Whatever he said made her blush and smile widely. The intimacy of it was obscene. Hannibal imagined taking her delicate body apart piece by piece. He would leave them strewn in various places about the town, not bothering with his typical artistic display.

“Excuse me,” he said politely to Frederick. “I could do with some air.”

Hannibal typically thrived in social situations, but tonight he felt only relief as the door closed behind him and he stood, taking in deep lungfuls of the cool night air. He contemplated leaving but decided against it. He was behaving quite unlike himself already. And if he stayed, he could engage Alana in conversation and find out what it was that Will said that pleased her so.

Then he could draw her closer, dissuading her sentiments regarding Will. He straightened, feeling taller, warmer, and altogether more like himself, and reentered the Graham household.

In his absence several people had gathered in the study around the fire, where Matthew was speaking animatedly.

"Ah, Hannibal," Matthew said, spotting him. To the others, Matthew said, "Hannibal doesn't know our local legend, of course."

"I'm afraid I do not," Hannibal agreed cordially. He smiled encouragingly at Matthew. Though Hannibal was far from superstitious, he found others' beliefs fascinating and his curiosity was entirely genuine.

For a moment Matthew only grinned and then Will said, "Well then, Matty? Do go on." Hannibal glanced at the door to the room where Will stood. He stepped far enough to the side that there was room for Will to stand next to him and was gratified when the other man moved to occupy the space, eyes glimmering with the same amusement they'd held earlier.

"Very well," Matthew began. "Let me tell you about the Hessian soldier."

The Hessian, as it turned out, was a man who'd had the misfortune of being decapitated by a cannonball during the United States' war for independence – the Revolutionary War, they were calling it – and, unable to rest until he was once more whole, rose from his grave night after night searching for his missing head. Aside from being a terrifying specter, it appeared he sometimes thought he had located his head … on the body of someone else.

"Of course, he can't cross the bridge," Matthew counseled, seriously. "If you find yourself being chased, crossing it is the most likely way to keep your head." He grinned. There was some applause and nervous laughter in response. Will was looking at Hannibal sidelong, a tiny smile on his face.

It was an enjoyable story, Hannibal supposed. It reminded him of a story from his homeland; a similarly headless horseman who killed by touch. Those taken by the horseman would then roam the earth as revenants until they had atoned for their sins.

The tale of the Headless Horseman was a story told to children late at night to keep them from getting into trouble. And to get them to confess to their misdeeds. Guilt was a strong motivator. Or so Hannibal understood it to be. It wasn't a feeling he was well-acquainted with.

With Matthew's story at an end the group began to disperse and, in consideration of the late hour, several people began taking their leave. As much as Hannibal longed for some time with Will alone, he decided to follow suit. Will walked him to the door.

"It was a lovely party, Will." Hannibal offered.

"Was it?" Will asked, turning his gaze to the fire. "I would have liked to have more time to talk."

The statement warmed Hannibal. He reached for Will's hand. It was bold of him, but Will did not pull away. "Nonsense. You and your father have been lovely hosts."

Will looked at their hands before meeting Hannibal's eyes. "Thank you for coming," Will said softly. "Take care on your way home."

"Beware the headless Hessian?" Hannibal smiled, teasing.

Will smiled in return, leaning forward to whisper conspiratorially. "Take care to cross the bridge. I enjoy your head on your shoulders."

They were very close but Hannibal longed to be closer. Instead, he wished Will and his father a good evening and, pulling on his hat and coat, headed out into the night. He was walking briskly down the lane, headed for the bridge - coincidence, of course, as it was the most direct route home - when he heard the sound of hooves.

Hannibal paused, frowning. As far as he knew, everyone had walked. No one had come on horseback. And yet someone was clearly riding nearby. He heard a whinny and turned in the direction of the sound. A dark horse and rider were silhouetted by the moon. As Hannibal watched the horse - he could tell it was a large steed, even from the distance - reared up on its hind legs.

Hannibal blinked. Its rider's silhouette ended at the neck.

In the rider's right hand were the horse's reins, but in its left something else. Something that appeared very like a head.

Not so headless, then, Hannibal thought. The horse whinnied again and started toward Hannibal, its large hooves like thunder across the ground.

Hannibal was not given to fear any more than guilt, but neither was he a fool. He turned and ran for the bridge. But his pace was no match for a giant steed and the horse and rider gained on him rapidly. Hannibal put on a burst of speed as he neared the bridge, realizing that it was likely not superstition or running water that kept the horse behind him from crossing but simply practicality: the bridge's covering was low and clearly intended for pedestrians. The horse with his rider simply would not fit.

With the horse still bearing down on him Hannibal crossed over the entrance to the bridge. Panting, he turned to look as the horse and rider came to a halt behind him. The rider's chest was angled toward Hannibal and he lifted his left hand, tossing something Hannibal's direction.

A glowing face flew at him. Hannibal ducked and heard the pumpkin hit the wall behind him, the candle guttering out as it collapsed into a mess of pulp. The rider dismounted and moved to the edge of the bridge.

Then, carefully, he stepped over the boundary.

And laughed.

Even Hannibal could admit the laugh was disturbing. It was guttural and harsh. Crouching, Hannibal reached for the knife in his shoe. The rider was quick but Hannibal was quicker, lunging forward and plunging the knife into the rider's stomach as the horseman began to turn.

The feeling of piercing flesh was familiar: first resistance and then give. The rider moaned in an all too human and very *alive* way as Hannibal withdrew the knife, blood and viscera shining black in the moonlight. The rider collapsed, hands pressing to the hole in his stomach as he fell to the ground.

As he did the shroud covering his head moved. Hannibal grabbed the fabric, pulling it off completely.

"Matthew," Hannibal breathed. He shook his head. The fool. Matthew moaned and Hannibal looked down at him dispassionately. The wound was a painful one and would eventually kill him - but not quickly. With a sigh, Hannibal sheaved his blade and placed his hands on either side of Matthew's head.

"I enjoyed your story, Matthew," Hannibal said, honestly. "But I cannot say I am terribly sorry." Matthew's dark eyes were full of fear.

One quick twist and that fear was gone.

Hannibal sat back on his haunches, catching his breath and wondering what to do with the body. The horse Matthew had been riding had disappeared or Hannibal might have tied Matthew to the saddle. A horse like that dragging the body would easily mask the cause of death.

But before Hannibal could come up with a solution he heard a snort and soft laughter from just beyond the bridge. Hannibal stood, reaching for his knife once more.

A figured stepped into the entrance of the bridge, hands held high. "I was wondering how his gambit would work," the figure said.

"Will," Hannibal exhaled.

"Yes." Will nudged Matthew's body with his toe. "He is quit dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," Hannibal said, marveling at Will's tone. There was no accusation there, merely curiosity.

"A pity," Will said with a sigh. "For all his faults, I liked Matty. He amused me." Will looked from Matthew's body back up to Hannibal, a smile playing at his lips. "We need an ax."

Will wandered off in the direction of his home, leaving Hannibal to stand next to Matthew's body, shocked and wondering what his next step should be.

If it were anyone else - had it been literally anyone other than Will - Hannibal would have simply killed them and either displayed the bodies or tossed them into the stream. But it had

been Will and so Hannibal was left standing in the middle of a covered bridge, waiting.

He felt the full breadth of his foolishness, but most of that ebbed when Will appeared again, moments later, holding an ax. "Help me?" he said to Hannibal before taking Matthew's hands and dragging the body off the bridge and to the edge of the lane. Realizing belatedly what Will intended to do, Hannibal grabbed Matthew's legs and helped move him.

Once the body was in a better place Will lifted the ax and swung it deftly.

It only took three swings to remove Matthew's head. Gripping it by the hair Will lifted Matthew's head, scrutinizing it for a moment before walking onto the bridge and tossing it rather brazenly into the water. There was a loud splash and Hannibal glanced around them but there was no sign of anyone near.

Will rested his arms on the railing and his chin on his arms, staring out into the night. His back was to Hannibal and this quiet sign of trust was somehow even more brazen than the act of tossing a head into the otherwise quiet stream.

"Will you kill me too?" Will asked softly. When Hannibal made no answer, he added: "I don't believe you will. I'm hoping I'm right."

"You are," Hannibal said after a long pause, his voice raw with the acknowledgement.

Will turned then, leaning his back against the railing and smiling softly. "Do you think he'll rise from his grave nightly and search for his missing head? He would like that, I think."

"Will he be grateful you've connected his death to the legend?"

Will shrugged. "He did that, not me."

"You helped him complete it."

"I did tell him not to try his game with you. He doesn't know you like I do." Will paused, his eyes dark on Hannibal's. "He doesn't know what you're capable of."

Hannibal took an involuntary step forwarded, pulled to Will as if by magnetism. "And you know what I'm capable of?" he challenged.

"Oh yes," Will sucked in a breath and smiled. Hannibal felt his heart flutter. He moved closer, feeling Will's breath against his chin.

"Will, I --" Hannibal was interrupted by a loud whinny. He and Will both turned toward the sound. "The horse must have come back for Matthew."

"I don't think so," Will said, a note of fear in his voice. It was the first time Hannibal had heard fear in Will's voice, he realized, and he followed Will's line of sight.

It looked as though it could have been the same horse, but something told Hannibal it was not. Looking at the horse and rider Hannibal had to concede that Matthew had done an

excellent job of recreating the image. It was not perfect, however. The rider was broader in the chest and thicker in the arms and legs. He was undeniably imposing. Taller, too.

Even without his head.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, the tale from Hannibal's "homeland" is a version of the headless horseman from Germany (supposedly) which I co-opted. So it exists, but is not Lithuanian.

Circle of Salt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will hadn't practices in almost 20 years - not since his teenage years when he'd found a few of his mother's books and briefly tried to be goth. As usual the attempt to fit in had failed and he'd quickly learned that being Wiccan and being Goth were not even remotely the same thing.

But the books intrigued him and had been a connection to the mother he'd never known and that his father had refused to discuss.

For most of his young life he hadn't thought about it. He knew other kids had mothers and he didn't, but at the time it didn't seem important. He never thought it was strange. And he didn't miss her - how could you miss someone you'd never known?

It was strange that the ache of her absence came some much later in life. It wasn't until he was a teenager and his father had muttered "I don't know what to do with you" for the first - and the last, although the damage was already done - time. What hurt worse than anything was that his dad hadn't meant anything by it - not really. He wasn't trying to be cruel, he was only being honest. He had no idea what to do with, or make of, his strange, sensitive boy who sometimes made comments that made you think he'd read your mind.

Will never doubted his father cared for him, but they were rarely physically affectionate and he found himself wondering if his mother would have been. If she would have wrapped her arms around him and held him.

They moved so often they kept very little, but there was one box that his father carted around with them everywhere and yet never opened. Opening it had felt like a betrayal, but he'd done it anyway, his desire to know greater than the guilt he felt at prying into something his father didn't want to share.

Along with that thought came a flash of anger: she was his *mother*. Didn't he deserve to know something about her?

There wasn't much in the box. Not that he'd expected there to be. A long white dress, a small silver locket with pictures of people Will didn't know inside. His grandparents, maybe? A pink butterfly barrette. Will's hospital bracelet from when he was born. A picture of his dad, looking much younger and happier, smiling widely next to a very pregnant woman who had to be his mother.

And, at the bottom, two books on modern witchcraft.

Will flipped through one of them now, trying to find suggestions for invocation when he laid his circle of salt. It was more about *intent*, of course, than anything else, but intent was

sometimes the hardest part. Focusing his mind was a near impossibility at the best of times these days.

He flipped to the Witches' Rede and scoffed. *And it harm none, do what you will*.

It had once meant something to him, but now Will didn't think that was possible. All he saw anywhere was harm. People inflicted it without thinking most days, and much more intentionally others.

Finally, Will flipped to a page with handwritten notes. He ran a finger over them before taking a deep breath and trying to center his thoughts.

Some spoke out loud, but Will never had. He shook a line of salt across the threshold of his front door first. Then, he drew the circle of salt first in his mind, imagining a barrier of protection around his thoughts. Finally, he mirrored the action in his living room, emptying the container of salt in a circle around him and imagining a wall rising up from it.

Inside the circle he was safe, he was purified. Any negative intent toward him would be blocked by the barrier. Anyone who wished him ill would not be able to reach him. He closed his eyes and sat, taking several deep breaths. He felt calmer already. More relaxed.

More at peace.

He must have fallen asleep, because he woke to knocking at his door.

"Will?" a voice called. A voice Will instantly recognized. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Will said. It was more of a croak. He must have been asleep for longer than he'd thought.

The croak of a response must have sounded worse than he'd thought, because the front door opened, slightly. Just enough to allow Hannibal to peek into the living room, concern apparent on his face.

"I'm okay," Will protested, his voice clearer now. Hannibal surveyed the room and the salt scatted around Will, most likely thinking that Will was not at all ok.

But Hannibal's face betrayed nothing of the sort. Instead, he nodded and began closing the door.

"Wait," Will said. Hannibal paused, his face peeking back through the door. "You might as well come in."

Hannibal opened the door, looking pleased, and stepped over the threshold. There was no hesitation and he gave no indication that he'd felt anything. The dogs didn't even bark - although Winston in particular was watching Hannibal intently - but then, they knew Hannibal.

Too, it was only salt, Will mused, as he tried to push himself to standing. One of his legs had fallen asleep and he wobbled, nearly falling before Hannibal reached out and caught him. He

stepped closer, getting better leverage to pull Will up.

“Leg’s asleep,” Will said, trying to shift it and wake it up. Hannibal hadn’t let go of him. Will glance behind the other man. He’d stepped over the salt, not disrupting the circle. “Huh.”

“Jack sent me to check on you,” Hannibal said. He still hadn’t moved. Will’s leg still felt like pins and needles but it was steady now. He didn’t move away either.

“Of course he did,” Will said. The resigned anger he would normally have felt wasn’t there. He felt only calm. “Heaven forbid I don’t answer a phone call.”

Hannibal’s lips twitched.

“Too busy to come bother me himself?”

“I volunteered.”

That surprised Will, and he was sure the surprise was obvious on his face.

“I am a doctor, Will.” The statement was light, almost teasing. Will wasn’t sure what to make of the ache in his chest. “And I thought a friendly face might be more welcome.” After a brief pause, he added: “Though I see you have adequately protected yourself.”

Will flushed. Hannibal’s fingers tapped a gentle rhythm on his lower back, reminding Will of where those hands still were. He flushed harder, despite telling himself there was no reason to be embarrassed. But in the end he couldn’t stop himself from saying “it’s silly.”

“Is it?” Hannibal asked, seriously. “Salt for purification and protection from negative energies. A tangible connection to the barriers built in your mind.” When Will said nothing, he asked: “Do you feel more centered, Will?”

“Stop psycho analyzing me,” Will grumbled half-heartedly. Hannibal smiled at that.

Will *did* feel more centered though. And he’d slept. Maybe he should buy some more salt, and sprinkle a circle around his bed. He leaned forward, half expecting Hannibal to step back or push him away.

Hannibal didn’t. Instead Hannibal’s arms wrapped around him more tightly, and Will found himself pressed to the other man’s chest. He sighed into the embrace.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this one doesn't end too abruptly. I debate that sometimes when I feel like I have tons more I *could* write but I'm also at what feels like a good stopping point for a prompt response.

Mummy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't that it was particularly heavy, but due to the delicate nature of what they were moving it had taken several people to move it into the display area and shift it into position. Hannibal had dictated the proceedings with his typical detached calm. Will tried to employ what Hannibal had once referred to as his "remarkable empathy" and take some of that calm for himself, but it hadn't worked. Instead Will felt lightheaded, breathing shallowly, and at times forgetting completely, until the mummy was set in place.

Once steadied he exhaled slowly through his nose, waiting for the relief and elation to come, but he was too tired for anything but exhaustion. He only narrowly stopped himself from leaning into Hannibal for support when the other man stepped closer.

"You look asleep on your feet," Hannibal said. It was blunt but gentle, and the kind of statement Will would have balked at hearing from anyone else. But Hannibal's observations consistently lacked judgment. And the man was not wrong.

"Long day," Will said, stating the obvious.

"When was the last time you had a short day, Will?"

Will gave him a tired smile. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone home before nightfall. To his surprise, Hannibal set a firm hand on Will's shoulder. "As your friend, and a former doctor, I suggest you go home and get a good night's sleep."

Will's body betrayed him with a yawn. He shook his head, embarrassed. "It's too late for that." It was already well after 10pm. "Beside," he added with a sigh, "I still have some paperwork to finish."

"You work too hard, Will." Hannibal's fingers tightened gently on his shoulder, squeezing before Hannibal removed his hand and let it fall naturally to his side.

"Maybe now that the exhibit is up," Will offered. Hannibal smiled in a way that suggested he didn't entirely believe him. Sadly, Hannibal was probably right. But as Will stared at the mummy he was thinking not of it, or the exhibit, but of his bed. It would be nice to crawl into bed. Nicer still if a pair of strong arms wrapped around him …

Will pressed his lips into a thin line, banishing the thought before it could go any further.

"Well, if I want to get home any time soon I should get started," he said, turning and heading for the elevator. He could feel Hannibal's surprise behind him. It would not appear on the other man's face, he knew, but Will was not normally so abrupt. Usually he enjoyed lingering with Hannibal; he's been enjoying it more and more as time went on.

And that was part of the problem. Will didn't have time for a relationship. He was too tired for even a one night stand. But it had been a long time, and Hannibal was a handsome man, and they spent a lot of time together … and sometimes Will's thoughts traveled down certain *paths* without his permission.

He felt less unbalanced when he was safely behind his desk in his upstairs office, if a little guilty for the way he'd left Hannibal downstairs. Hannibal had been graceful as ever, saying a polite "have a nice night, Will" after Will as he walked away.

Part of Will wanted to turn back, head back down the elevator, see if Hannibal was still there. Go home and get a good night's sleep, like Hannibal had suggested.

He didn't. Instead, he picked up a pen and got to work.

*

Will startled awake several hours later. There was a covered container sitting at the edge of the desk and Will stared at it, uncomprehendingly, as he blinked himself back to awareness. He groaned. His head felt cotton. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something.

There was a card in front of the container, and after a moment Will recognized Hannibal's flowing script: *Will, It will reheat well in the break room microwave. -H*

It must have hurt Hannibal to write that; he'd been obviously appalled to see a microwave in the museum break room.

Will ran a finger around the card. If Hannibal had made this earlier he would have given it to Will before he left. Meaning the man had gone home, cooked, and come back to feed Will, only to find him asleep at his desk and leave the food behind for reheating.

The thought made Will flush, and he was glad there was no one to see him.

He checked his watch. It was nearly 5am. He wondered how long the food had been sitting on his desk - probably a few hours at least - and if he should take it to the break room or take it home. He needed to change and maybe he could catch an hour or two of sleep in his own bed.

In the end he opted for the break room.

Five o'clock in the morning was a strange time to eat linguine, but the food was delicious. After debating the wisdom of it, Will made himself coffee and was sipping it as he wandered back through the exhibit on his way to the rear door and the parking garage.

Will couldn't help the shiver as he wandered through the 'Mummies of the World' exhibit. Despite being the one who put it together, and being pleased with the result, it was a bit creepy to walk through a silent exhibit of the preserved dead.

When thinking of mummies most people thought of Egypt, and there were plenty of Egyptian artifacts and a few mummies. But there were so many other mummies and other cultures that used mummification as a means to preserve their dead. There were also displays on the bog

bodies that had been discovered in various areas, and other types of accidental mummification, as well as two examples of Chinchorro mummies and a Sokushinbutsu.

It was this last one that Will came to stand in front of, checking their work from last night. He frowned. Hadn't the head been angled more to the left?

He scrutinized the neck through the glass case, thinking he would have to check it more closely later. But from what he could tell there was no damage. And even so, what damage could possibly have *moved* the mummy's head, even that slightly?

Will sipped his coffee and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. Hannibal was right, he *really* needed a good night's sleep.

Because nothing had caused the head to move, obviously. It hadn't moved at all. Will's memory was normally excellent, but this time it was wrong.

Shaking his head, he reached into his pocket and removed his car keys. A shiver ran down his spine as he headed for the exit, and he glanced back over his shoulder.

It was ridiculous, but he could have sworn the mummy was watching him.

*

Hannibal made his way into the museum shortly after 7am, two cups of coffee in his hand. The museum didn't open until 10am, and the exhibit was ready, but Will would be there early.

If he'd gone home at all. The smell of Will's arousal the night before had been faint but sweet, and Hannibal hoped it was more than a fleeting fancy; the result of late nights and long hours spent alone together.

He'd taken a chance and brought Will dinner last night, only to find the curator asleep at his desk, a small line of spittle trailing from the corner of his mouth to his desk.

Will in slumber was a sight to behold, and if Hannibal took his time settling the food and note *just so* on the edge of Will's desk, giving himself ample time to commit the lines of Will's face to memory - well. There had been no harm in it, certainly.

The memory warmed him as he made his way into the museum and to the room housing the newest exhibition. Will would either be there or in his office on the fourth floor.

He found Will in short order, the curator standing stiffly in front of one of the mummies, a pensive look on his face. Hannibal passed him a cup of coffee, an action that seemed to startle him.

"Oh," Will's eyes widened. They looked a bit glassy and Hannibal curbed the urge to lay a hand against the other man's forehead. Most likely Will was simply exhausted. Whatever sleep he'd caught at his desk probably hadn't been much and certainly hadn't been enough. The circles under his eyes were deeper and darker.

Will looked asleep on his feet, even more so than the night before.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you,” Will said, reaching for the cup of coffee. Hannibal didn’t release it immediately, taking the opportunity to watch Will’s face and inhale his shifting scent. He’d showered quickly and hadn’t used aftershave, which allowed Hannibal to appreciate it all the more. There was the slightest hint of blood and Hannibal’s eyes found the mark on Will’s chin where he had cut himself shaving.

And there, again, mixed in with embarrassment was the lightly sweet scent of Will’s arousal - faint but definite.

“I believe you had doctor’s orders to get some sleep,” Hannibal said, letting go of the coffee cup.

Will took a sip of coffee, defiance in his eyes. But it faded quickly. “Tonight,” he said, eyes flicking to the mummy. “I clearly need it.”

He did, but Hannibal wondered what had caused the sudden acquiescence. Will’s eyes had returned to the mummy and Hannibal followed their path. He was looking at the monk’s face.

Hannibal wasn’t a personal fan of mummies. He preferred fresher ingredients.

Nonetheless he could understand the draw: people were fascinated with death and mummies offered an academic setting for that fascination. It was a far more palatable pastime to visit a museum and look at the mummies than to stare at the lurid details of a crime scene. After all, mummies were part of human history.

The Sokushinbutsu was a particularly interesting case. Scholars suspected the majority of them were faked. The mummies themselves were real enough, of course. But they’d been mummified *after* death.

This one was purportedly the real thing.

“It’s a crown jewel in the exhibition,” Hannibal said.

“Yeah.” Will’s response lacked not only his usual enthusiasm, but *any* enthusiasm. He seemed distracted.

“An existence that is beyond life and death,” Hannibal added.

Will startled again at that. He laughed, but the sound was strangled. He muttered something to himself; Hannibal only caught “not really dead.”

That was concerning. He took Will in. There was a slight sheen of sweat on the curator’s forehead and on his upper lip.

“Will?” This time Hannibal did not stop himself from reaching out to place a hand over Will’s forehead. Will stilled at the touch, his eyes widening and darkening.

Will was warm to the touch, and while touch was not an accurate measurement of temperature, he was warm enough that Hannibal frowned. removing his hand. He was pleased at the way Will leaned toward him, unconsciously chasing the sensation.

"Are you feeling alright?" Hannibal asked. Will laughed again.

"No, not really," he said. "I thought that mummy moved."

Hannibal stared at the mummy. "Moved how?"

"Well obviously it didn't *actually* move," Will scoffed at himself. He drank his coffee, clearly debating saying more. Finally, he added: "I swear the head was in a different position last night, but I don't see any damage."

Hannibal leaned in, looking as closely as he could through the glass barrier. "Damage would be the obvious cause for any change, but we were very careful. And I don't see anything either. Nor do I notice any difference," he added, gently.

"Because there isn't any. I'm tired. Like you said, I need a good night's sleep." Will sighed, then rallied and held up his coffee cup. "In the meantime, thank you for this. And the food last night." The faint trace of color on his cheeks was incredibly alluring.

"You're quite welcome, Will." Hannibal was on the verge of extending a dinner invitation when Will interrupted his thoughts.

"It's going to be a long day and I can't stare at a mummy all day."

"No," Hannibal said. "We'll leave that to the guests."

Will smiled at that before turning, his exit only slightly less abrupt than the night before. Hannibal inhaled the scent he'd left in his wake and looked at the mummy with distaste. It was academically interesting, he admitted, but Hannibal couldn't imagine anyone starving themselves *by choice.*

He scowled at the artifact before him, an uncharacteristic display of emotion. But there was no one to see except the mummy, and it wasn't looking.

*

The day was long and thankfully uneventful. The unveiling of the exhibit – which in this context meant removing the rope that had blocked off the room for the past several months – went flawlessly and visitation was already up 20% from the day prior by lunch time.

Will had disappeared, leaving most of the interaction with the public to Hannibal. Neither of them truly needed to be there, of course; Will might technically have been in charge but it was Randall who managed the staff day to day, and he had things well in hand.

Hannibal hoped that Will's disappearance meant he was getting some rest in his office, but each time the curator reappeared he looked as fatigued as he had that morning. Concerningly,

Hannibal found him in front of the Sokushinbutsu mummy more than once, prompting Will to give him a sheepish look and disappear.

As it drew closed to 5pm traffic began to dwindle. The museum was open for another few hours, but Hannibal had designs on drawing Will out of the building before closing time for once. Hannibal wandered through the exhibit, pleased not to see Will. He paused before the mummy, something at the back of his skull prickling and causing him to scrutinize the image before him.

The head was as it had been before. The torso still loosely draped with a traditional monk's garment and hiding much of the desiccation. The legs were still folded beneath it, hands resting on its thighs … Hannibal paused. The left hand was still resting on its thigh, but the mummy's right hand was on its knee.

Hannibal frowned, searching his memory palace for the memory of that morning. He examined the head position, torso, arms, hands … the right hand had been on its thigh.

It hadn't moved far, it had *nearly* been on the knee, but the difference was undeniable.

Will was right. The mummy had moved.

Chapter End Notes

In today's tale of "weird but interesting": I enjoy falling into rabbit holes when googling for inspiration. The word mummy does tend to trigger thoughts of Egypt, but there *are* a lot of other mummies out there, and the Sokushinbutsu are pretty interesting. They're Buddhist mummies and the monks really were trying to get to a place "beyond life and death" by practicing a rather severe (to my mind) form of asceticism, to the point of death, and entering mummification while actually alive. There are examples of these mummies, but scholars generally agree that the monks did not manage to mummify themselves while alive (although I read one supposedly does exist, but is that true?) but were mummified after death.

Anyway. This is another story I might continue, or revamp and continue, at some ill-defined point in the future when I somehow am gifted with a lot of free time to write lol.

Popcorn Balls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will reached into the bowl with grease coated hands, grabbing a handful of popcorn and candy and pressing it into a ball before laying it on the parchment paper. "When you asked if I wanted to help prep, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind," he said.

Hannibal had to admit the afternoon wasn't exactly as he'd planned either. He'd thought that cooking with the profiler would distract him from the distraction that was Will Graham, but instead he found himself fascinated with the movement of Will's forearms as he shaped the popcorn.

"I didn't think you could even give out homemade treats anymore," Will said, eying one of the popcorn balls in much the same way he considered a crime scene. "Where did you learn to make these anyway?"

Hannibal considered which question to address first. "I have always given out homemade treats."

Will wasn't looking at him, but there was a small, self-satisfied smile on the profiler's face.

Of course Will would be pleased at wounding him. It was likely he sought any retribution, however small. And normally Hannibal would be glad to be the object of Will's attention, even if it was the profiler's wrath that was directed at him. But more and more Hannibal found himself *hurt* by the dozens of small cuts Will insisted on inflicting.

Hannibal told himself Will would see eventually.

"I wasn't insulting your cooking, Hannibal," Will said. *Hannibal*. That was a slip. Will always called him Doctor Lecter.

Always.

Hannibal allowed the use of his name to warm him. He couldn't know for certain with Will if it had been an accident or something down purposefully to throw him off balance. Either was entirely possible and it should matter to him which it was. And yet it didn't.

And therein lay a large problem. He cared increasingly less for Will's motivations for being near him, only that he was.

"If anyone can get away with it, it's you." The sentiment seemed genuine enough, although Hannibal was not unaware of the possible (probable) subtext.

"I'm not 'getting away with' anything, Will," Hannibal protested as Will looked back at him with raised eyebrows. "Homemade items are much healthier, and I simply do not share a preoccupation with store-bought items."

“These have corn syrup in them,” Will pointed out, “so you may have a debate on your hands about the health benefits. And I’m not sure it’s a preoccupation so much as an assurance you’re not poisoning the neighborhood children.”

Hannibal stared at Will in genuine horror. “I would never.”

Will looked back at him in that considering way that once again reminded Hannibal of the profiler surveying a crime scene. As though he were picking Hannibal apart and putting him back together. Seeing how the pieces fit.

The thought of Will taking him apart suffused his skin with a pleasant tingling sensation.

“I know," Will said eventually, and Hannibal was nearly embarrassed in his relief.

Will looked back into the bowl, frowning at what remained before scooping it out and pressing it together into a small ball, about a third of the size of the others. He sighed. “I guess I don’t have your precision at measuring.”

“Practice.”

“Now what?” Will asked.

“Now we wait for them to cool.” Hannibal reached into a cupboard and removed two wineglasses. “Drink? Or would you prefer whiskey?”

“Wine sounds good,” Will said, watching as Hannibal poured. “You never did tell me how you learned to make them.” He reached for his sleeve and began to roll it down, before thinking the better of it and rolling it back up. Hannibal pursed his lips in silent gratitude at Will’s continued bearing of his forearms and sighed internally at himself.

“It was when I was at Johns Hopkins. One of my classmates made them every year. She told me her mother handed them out at Halloween. I started helping her.”

“And a tradition was born,” Will murmured. “Girlfriend?”

Hannibal wondered if he was imagining the heat behind the question, the hard sound of word in Will’s mouth. Most likely it was a projection of his own want, but the suggestion of jealousy had heat flaring in Hannibal’s chest. “No,” he said. “I was seeing someone else at the time. Thankfully he was not the jealous type.”

He stressed the pronoun lightly. Will went pink at the ears and lifted his wineglass but did not immediately drink. Hannibal wondered at Will’s embarrassment. Was it because he had assumed incorrectly - or entirely correctly? Or perhaps it had nothing to do with Hannibal. Hannibal had often wondered at Will’s own romantic inclinations - his attachment to Alana not withstanding - and had considered more than once steering the conversation in that direction during one of their therapy sessions.

In the end he’d been strangely reluctant to push; afraid perhaps that he would discover the entire tentative flirtation between them was fictional. He would be content with friendship. But he was not ready for the loss of the potential for something more.

Will looked back at the popcorn balls and cleared his throat. “How long?”

“Ten minutes, give or take. Then we drizzle them with chocolate and bag them.” He reached for another cupboard, pulling down one of the popcorn balls he’d made in an earlier batch. They were each individually bagged and tied with silver ribbon.

Will looked at him, disbelief clear on his face. He reached for the bag. Hannibal had drizzled this one with milk chocolate and peanut butter sauce, to complement the pieces of peanut butter cup he’d incorporated.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Hannibal was momentarily surprised by the profanity. Will so rarely used it.

“It’s no wonder no one ever questioned you handing out homemade treats. They’ve probably been wondering where you buy these and assume they can’t afford them themselves.” To Hannibal’s surprise, Will started laughing. “They probably think you’re spending hundreds of dollars on their kids.”

Will gestured at the batch resting on parchment. “And you clearly don’t need my help.”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment and then shrugged. “I enjoy your company,” he said, as lightly as he could.

“Well,” Will said, turning from him, and reaching for the smallest ball of the batch. “I’m eating this one.” He popped it into his mouth, and as Hannibal watched the movement of Will’s jaw, he couldn’t help but notice the pink from Will’s ears seemed to have spread to his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

I was 100% imagining Hannibal being completely extra with popcorn balls when I originally wrote this prompt, and so this response largely comes from that.

However, I have a smutty response 3/4 of the way written as well. In the end I was feeling this one more and so this is the response I finished, but I may still complete the other one and paste it separately.

Hobgoblin

Hannibal frowned into the silverware drawer. He closed it, opened the dishwasher, looked inside, frowned, reopened the silverware drawer and frowned again.

“Hannibal?” Will had never seen the other man look so lost.

“We’re missing forks,” Hannibal said, sounding as though he didn’t quite believe it.

“What?” Will crossed the kitchen.

“There are only six forks.” Hannibal had a plaintive look on his face and Will fought the urge to laugh.

“I think we’ll be ok with six.” He wasn’t certain why Hannibal had purchased eight of everything to begin with; the likelihood that they would be throwing a dinner party any time soon was slim to none.

“That’s not the point.” Hannibal’s voice was shockingly close to a whine. Will placed a hand on his bicep. Hannibal looked at it for a long moment before looking up.

Will probably shouldn’t have touched him. Touch between them was a strange, strained thing. Not that Will wanted it to be, but things between them had been … *odd* was the only way to describe it. Hannibal, who had in the past touched Will frequently, rarely if ever put his hands on Will anymore. And Will was not usually one to initiate even casual touch.

Will swallowed but didn’t remove his hand. At least not immediately. “I’m sure they’re not missing.”

“Then where are they?” Hannibal asked in irritation. Will considered him. Hannibal was still not the easiest person to read - old habits die hard, Will supposed, and he still had a tendency to moderate his reactions - but the fear beneath his frustration was clear and Will furrowed his brow.

“What’s wrong?”

Hannibal now looked distinctly annoyed and Will mentally measured the distance to the knife block. He probably wouldn’t need one. But it didn’t hurt to be prepared.

In front of him Hannibal sagged. “Things are going missing. A shirt, a tie, forks.”

“Your shirt got mixed in with my laundry,” Will said, sensibly. Hannibal’s pout was unfairly sexy. Will ignored the flutter in his stomach. He wouldn’t admit to that anymore than the fact that he’d kept Hannibal’s shirt for a full two days before returning it, just so he could look at their clothes mingled together in his closet.

This was part of why they didn't touch. It was also why they should be touching, and Will was no longer sure what was stopping them. Him, really. What was stopping *him*, because he was absolutely certain Hannibal was waiting on *him.*

"How?" Hannibal asked. It was a silly question, on the surface of it, but Hannibal was right: he and Will did not mingle their laundry, and neither of them had enough of it that they overlapped when they ran loads.

"Maybe you left it in the dryer?" This too was a reasonable assumption - but Will knew it was unlikely. But then what on earth *was* the explanation? "Or maybe we have a poltergeist," Will teased. Hannibal looked at him gravely.

"This is not a laughing matter, Will."

"I'm sure they'll turn up," Will said gently. He move to open their cupboard and remove a coffee cup, frowning when he looked inside. He looked back at Hannibal and frowned. "I think I found your forks."

Hannibal moved behind him, reaching into the cupboard and withdrawing the forks. Will turned, very aware of the forks in the Hannibal's hand but also the way he was still leaning into Will's space, forcing Will to lean back against the counter. If Will pushed forward, they would be chest to chest.

Hannibal stepped backward. "I'm certain I wouldn't have put them there." He looked disconcerted. Will was certain Hannibal wouldn't have put them there either, which was even more disconcerting.

Unsure what to do he turned back around and grabbed the mug he'd originally been after, starting their electric kettle to make tea.

*

In the days that followed what Will dubbed in his mind as The Fork Incident he also noticed things going missing.

Well - not missing exactly. But misplaced in ways he was certain neither he nor Hannibal would have done. He opened the dishwasher to find his keys inside. Hannibal walked into the study to find the couch cushions had been rearranged. Hannibal's missing tie reappeared under his pillow. (He hadn't returned it yet, Hannibal still thought it was missing.)

One morning Will walked into the kitchen and discovered that all their dishes had been rearranged.

"If I were sleepwalking again, you would notice," Will said, confronting a haggard-looking Hannibal when he came down for coffee.

"Did you previously rearrange everything in your home while sleepwalking, Will?" The annoyed tone in Hannibal's voice was tempered by his obvious fatigue. Will didn't think he'd ever seen the man look so tired.

It was that more than anything that answered his implied question. Hannibal would definitely have said something, if only to save himself the frustration. Not that the doctor wouldn't have enjoyed playing Will, but he was suffering under whatever this was as much - perhaps more - than Will was.

"Then what is going on?" Will asked. "It feels like one or both of us has lost our minds. And I don't want to feel that way again." He words came out more vulnerable than he'd intended. Hannibal reached toward him but dropped his hand in an aborted motion. Will stared at it, hanging loosely by Hannibal's side, and as he watched Hannibal's fingers curled slowly, as if his hand were self-conscious.

"Hobgoblins are a common myth in this area of the world," Hannibal said, drawing Will's attention to his mouth. It took a moment before the words sank in, and even then Will didn't understand why Hannibal had said them.

"And?"

Hannibal sighed, exasperated but, Will sensed, not with him. "Perhaps I *am* losing my mind."

That was a terrifying prospect, both for Hannibal and everyone around him. Will studied him as Hannibal continued.

"Hobgoblins are known to be pranksters. Some of the more mischievous fair folk."

"Fairies?" Will interrupted. Hannibal nodded.

"They don't normally stick around if they're not being rewarded."

Will snorted. "Rewarded for causing mayhem?" He was pleased when Hannibal cracked a smile, however small and tired.

"They also sometimes do chores."

"Is that what they thought they were doing when they rearranged the dishes? And the couch cushions?"

Hannibal only shrugged and Will could sense that even contemplating something like this - fairies, of all things - was difficult for Hannibal. For all his interest in art and philosophy, he was still a scientist at heart. And fairies were - well. Not real.

"What do we do?" Will asked. He was certain he wasn't misjudging Hannibal's relief at the question; that Will was willing to go along with this.

"A bowl of cream on the hearth."

Will nodded. "Ok then, I guess we need to buy some cream."

*

Will wasn't expecting much when the set the dish on the hearth before bed. Hannibal didn't look like he was expecting much either.

But it was a relief to wake up the next morning to find the house as they left it. No dishes had mysteriously moved during the night, both sets of keys were on the table in the hallway, and no laundry had gone missing overnight.

All eight forks were accounted for.

Will sighed in relief. Hannibal looked brighter, if also slightly troubled that feeding the hobgoblin had worked. The only items still missing were Hannibal's tie (not actually missing) and one of Will's socks, which had probably been eaten by the dryer. (Hannibal had insisted this wasn't a real occurrence, but considering they were setting out cream nightly for a hobgoblin Will thought Hannibal should reconsider the possibility.)

Things had gone back to normal. Or so Will thought until he stepped out of the shower, only to find that there were no towels.

There had definitely been a full body towel, one of the ridiculously luxurious soft towels that Hannibal had insisted on buying that Will had reluctantly come to thoroughly enjoy.

And even if Will had somehow been foolish enough not to have that, there were hand towels in the bathroom. Not exactly ideal, but at least he could dry himself off without having to wander into the linen closet in the hall.

Still dripping, he peeked out the doorway. Seeing the hallway was clear, Will stepped through the door, only to immediately step on something cold and yelp. Loudly.

"Will?" He heard Hannibal's voice before he saw Hannibal's face, looking out from his own bedroom.

Will stared back at him in shock. Will was wet, naked, and had just stepped on an ice cube that had no business being in the hallway.

"What happened?" Hannibal asked. He kept eye contact with Will, careful to only look at his face.

"Hobgoblin got tired of its cream?" Will suggested. "It stole my towels."

"Are you injured?" Hannibal said, exiting his room. "I heard you yell."

Will gestured at the floor but noticed Hannibal's eyes did not leave his face. *Afraid to look elsewhere, Doctor Lecter?* He wasn't sure where the impulse to goad came from, but he only barely refrained from saying the words. "Ice," he explained.

Hannibal did look down then, considering Will's wet footprints and the puddles left behind by rapidly melting ice cubes with that annoyingly sexy pout.

"I should get a towel." Will gestured at the linen closet when Hannibal looked back up at him.

“I’ll get you one,” Hannibal said. Will smiled to himself. Of course Hannibal would still want to minimize the damage to his floors. He was still smiling when Hannibal walked back over. He started to hand Will the towel, but then shook it out, wrapping it over Will’s shoulders, standing almost unbearably close as he did.

Will could feel Hannibal’s heat and stepped toward it as Hannibal tugged lightly on the towel to pull it more firmly around Will’s shoulders. Will thought of Hannibal reaching around him, pulling the forks out of the cupboard. If Will had pressed forward even the slightest bit … he hadn’t then, but he did now, his still damp chest against Hannibal’s as Hannibal pulled more tightly on the towel, drawing them together.

Will tipped his chin up, grazing his lips over Hannibal’s.

Hannibal dropping the towel to put his hands in Will’s hair was possibly the most gratifying response Will had ever received to a kiss. Despite the firm grip of Hannibal’s hands in his hair the kiss itself was gentler than Will would have thought possible. He pulled back to catch his breath and pressed his fingers to his lips, smiling at Hannibal from beneath them.

“Your tie’s under my pillow,” he confessed on impulse.

“Your sock is under mine.”

Hannibal silence Will’s laughter with another kiss, but Will though heard an echo of it down the hall; the echoing changing into something deeper. Throatier.

More mischievous.

Exorcist

I've been called to the home of one Abel Gideon, accused of murdering his family in a fit of fugue. He claims not to know who he is or to recall the actions. His physician has petitioned the church for an exorcism. Mr. Gideon is confined to his home, having thus far avoided in jail for this heinous crime through claims of demonic possession. A claim with which the bishop appears to agree, for I have been tasked with performing the exorcism. I am to be assisted by one Hannibal Lector, a man I know by —

"It's with an 'e'." Will looked up, startled. He'd been entirely focused on documenting the information that he had not heard the door to the cabin open, and he was surprised to find a man standing behind him.

"Reading over another's shoulder is rude," Will said, snapping the book shut.

"I apologize," the man said. Will had the impression he was sincere, despite not looking particularly contrite. "However I still must insist on correcting the spelling of my name; it's L-e-c-t-*e*-r."

Will blanched. "I - oh. I'm sorry."

"No need," the man - Hannibal Lecter, obviously - seated himself on the bench opposite. Will took him in. He was dressed in a flashier manner than Will had anticipated; colors and patterns on his suit and tie that seemed like they should have clashed, but on him were somehow debonair. It was nothing one would expect of a man of the cloth. Which, Will supposed, made sense.

He was tall - Will himself was not short, but his erstwhile companion had a few inches on him - broad shouldered with high cheekbones, sandy blonde hair and golden brown eyes.

All in all, Hannibal Lecter was a startlingly attractive man. But far from his looks, it was the air of quiet confidence that caught Will's attention and held it.

Hannibal sat on the bench, looking Will over much as Will was looking at him. His face was impassive, but there was a warmth in his eyes, as though seating himself across from Will and taking him in were an experience to be enjoyed. This despite their initial interaction.

"You are William Graham, I take it?" Hannibal asked. His arms were spread wide on the back of the seat. He did not lean forward to extend a hand, for which Will was immensely grateful. He did not particularly enjoy touching others.

Still, he should have introduced himself. Will felt himself flush and tugged self-consciously on his collar. Hannibal's eyes followed the motion before meeting Will's eyes once more. "Ah - yes. That is - everyone calls me Will. Who's not calling me Father Graham, that is. My friends call me Will."

A lie, he thought. His father had called him Will, but no one in his current life called him anything other than 'Father'. Hannibal was smiling, the curve of his lips soft. The depth of the smile was in his eyes, and Will found himself staring back for longer than was strictly necessary. "If we are to be friends, then you must call me Hannibal."

Will stared at him, becoming aware he was chewing on his lower lip only when his mouth tasted faintly of blood.

Friends. Will did not have friends. A priest in his line of work did not even have a congregation or work with other employees of the Church with whom he could *pretend* to be friends. Mostly that suited him fine.

"Have we become friends so quickly?" Will asked, more than a hint of skepticism in his voice.

Hannibal's face did not change, yet he appeared to become more gleeful in the face of Will's challenge; though Will would have been hard pressed to say why he was so certain of that. Hannibal hummed thoughtfully, pursing his lips before saying: "Perhaps not yet, but I shall call you Will and hope."

The rest of the trip was made in silence. Will retrieved his journal, eyeing Hannibal suspiciously over the top of it before he began writing. Hannibal was watching him quite openly, an attention that would normally make Will bristle with nerves. And yet when he considered Hannibals eyes on him, he found he did not mind it.

It wasn't until they were disembarking that Hannibal spoke again. "I'm assuming it's by reputation."

"What?" Will asked, startled and confused. He had been reaching down to grab his bag and paused to look up at Hannibal. The position left him off-balance as the train reached their stop, braking rather more forcefully than was necessary - at least in Will's opinion, since it had him stumbling. Hannibal reached out an arm to steady him, gripping Will firmly at the elbow.

"How you know me," Hannibal prompted.

"Oh." Realization might have come more quickly if Will hadn't been so focused on the feel of that hand on him. He took a breath to gather himself back together as Hannibal withdrew his hand. "Yes; a demonologist. Unaffiliated with the church, but well-respected."

Hannibal was gathering his own bag but cast Will an amused glance. "I wouldn't say unaffiliated." He opened the door to their compartment. "After all, I am here on church business."

"I confess I don't entirely understand why. Are you even a believer?" Will asked as they stepped out and onto the station platform.

"The Church would not entrust me with their most valued exorcist if I had not already proven myself."

Will flushed. "The demon will use lies to trick you. They feed upon our fears and our insecurities. You must be ready. Mentally and spiritually."

"I do not fear what we are about to face." Hannibal looked utterly calm and at ease. "Are you prepared, Will?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"From what I read - rudely, I admit -," Hannibal held up his hands, placating, "you do not appear thoroughly convinced of the need for an exorcism in this case."

Will scowled, but said nothing.

"It does seem rather convenient," Hannibal added after several long moments. Will looked over, searching his face as he navigated them through the crowds.

"The bishop was convinced."

"So he was."

"Don't concern yourself over me, Hannibal. I'm ready." Will lifted his chin and hoisted his bag a little higher, striding after Hannibal into the crowd.

The ride to the Gideon home was a brief one, and less than an hour later they were standing in front of the man himself. Even Will had to admit he looked harrowing: his brown hair lanky and unwashed, his eyes dull and his skin sallow. He lay back on the bed and only turned his head to watch them; the rest of his body lay unmoving. The room stank of urine and Will wrinkled his nose involuntary. He glanced quickly at Hannibal, but the other man did not react.

Gideon's eyes seemed to brighten as Will stepped closer to the bed. "Well, well, well, what have we hear?" he said. His voice was strong and there was a lilt to the words. Not exactly musical, but sing-song. The tone was different from his next words, spoken far more gutturally and virtually spat at Will: "A priest. A man of the cloth. A man of *virtue* and *integrity.*"

The change in voice was nothing Will hadn't heard before, but it still sent a chill through him and he said a quick prayer to himself. He looked at Hannibal, ready to warn the other man not to respond, but Hannibal was studying Gideon with an odd look on his face. The light coming through the single uncovered pane in the window was also striking him strangely; his brown eyes appeared almost almost red.

Will blinked and Hannibal was looking at him. His eyes were brown. Will shook off the image; they hadn't even begun and the demon was already getting to him. From behind him he heard a high pitched laughter. Hannibal's gaze moved from Will back to the man in the bed. He still appeared calm and at ease, and not the slightest bit fearful. In fact he was looking at Gideon almost as though the man had disappointed him.

The volume of the laughter behind him grew, stopping abruptly as Will turned around. "What has our dear little father brought with him? Brought the Devil to address his misbehaving children, have you?" The laughter began again, this time a hoarse, choking noise with almost a braying quality.

Abruptly it stopped, Gideon's eyes fixed behind Will - on Hannibal, he assumed, but he resisted the urge to turn around. He heard Hannibal take a step closer to him. His presence behind Will seemed to grow, the shadows around them deepening and lengthening. The hairs on the back of Will's neck stood up as air moved across his skin. He smelled sulfur but the air was not hot, but very, very cold.

If he had not been convinced on the train he was now and he steeled himself. This demon was powerful and it was already toying with him. Behind him the presence continued to grow, the chill suffusing his skin.

When he could resist no longer he turned, berating himself as he did.

But there was nothing there; only Hannibal, who held out a copy of the Bible to him, open to the Rite. Will did not need to read the words, but the book felt comfortingly solid in his hands.

"Shall we begin?"

Dark Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will laughed, running between the trees, as Hannibal chased after him. They were both getting older, growing into young men with duties and responsibilities. But in the moment he didn't feel like a young man on the cusp of adulthood. He felt free, rushing through the woods and being chased by his best friend.

Hannibal was slightly taller, with a longer gait, but it wasn't enough of an advantage to catch Will. He was still the faster runner. He worked hard and his body was strong. And most importantly, he knew the woods better. Or so he thought.

He was nearly tackled from his left side, Hannibal's brief clutch at his jacket enough to top him off balance. He tripped, rolling down the small embankment. It wasn't until he reached the bottom that he realized Hannibal had also tripped, or perhaps fallen when he'd lunged at Will. His friend landed next to him, a great gust of air forced out of him with a loud "oomph."

Will turned, smiling, and shifted closer to his friend. "Beat you." His skin stung from the scratches, but he didn't care.

"So you did." There was an intensity in Hannibal's eyes and Will found himself flicking his own away. He felt Hannibal reach out and run a hand through his hair and down the side of his cheek to cup his neck. "Will."

Will looked back at his friend, swallowing harshly. Hannibal said his name as though he were something special. Will felt his skin tingle. There were going to kiss - he *knew* they were going to kiss - and it was a shock to him to realize in that moment how much he wanted it. Hannibal's breath was on his cheek and on his lips. Will closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of the fallen leaves on the ground, the forest around them, and *Hannibal*.

Hannibal's lips were nearly on his when there was a shout in the distance, the words difficult to make out but the warning clear in the tone. Will sat up, sharply. Hannibal stood and reached a hand down, pausing to help Will up.

Will would remember that pause. If Hannibal hadn't stopped to help him, if Hannibal hadn't pulled him sharply to standing and physically pushed him and told him to run … the darkness was closing in on them.

It never came this early. But it was there, and Will was running, Hannibal pressing against him and telling him to "run, run".

Will wondered if he had ever truly been the stronger runner or if Hannibal had only allowed Will to believe he was. Hannibal had caught him in the woods, and he'd pressed Will forward as the darkness came for them, sweeping forward through the trees. Will felt the

cold at his back as he cleared the edge of it, falling into Molly as she screamed and turning to scream himself, crying for Hannibal.

There was no sign of his friend as the darkness receded. Molly held him tightly, but Will fought her grip and broke away, running after the dark. Hannibal had been right behind him.

Crying was not something men did, but Will didn't care. He'd long been labled sensitive and odd. His father could chastise him later. As he wandered into the now-empty woods, Will cried for his friend, and for what could have been.

*

"You need to forget about him, Will."

Will felt a flash of anger and knew it was obvious in his face as he turned. Molly flinched but stepped closer, laying her had on his arm. Will knew it was supposed to be a kindness, but it was all he could do not to shake her off.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean," she trailed off and, thankfully, removed her hand. A moment later she started again: "I don't mean *forget*. But it's been a year. And you know the dark never returns anyone."

It also never came that close to the village. It had never come past the stream before, and it hadn't again in the year since Hannibal had been taken.

"I can't Molly," Will said, softening at her expression. Molly had always been kinder to him than most. She was chewing on her lower lip now, her brow furrowed, her eyes unfocused and aimed somewhere over his right shoulder. She nodded to herself, seeming to come to a decision.

"You could see Reba."

"Reba?"

"She's not that bad." It was Molly's eyes that flashed in irritation now. "She's smart and she's kind, and she never let go of Francis either. The two of you will have something in common."

Molly's chest was heaving in anger and Will held his hands up, placating. She exhaled.

"I'm sorry Will," she said. "I know you didn't mean … you wouldn't judge her. Or me for going to her."

"You went to her?"

Molly flushed, looking away. "You were the one who told me she's just an eccentric with some knowledge of herbs."

That was true, but Will was still surprised that Molly had made the trek. Reba lived on the edge of town, just inside the woods.

The woods no one ventured into after Hannibal's disappearance, despite the fact that the darkness hadn't come that far in before or after. *Why that time?* Will had wondered it often, but there was no answer and the question only left an ache in his heart.

It was unlike Molly to take the risk. Unless -

"When did you see her?" Will asked. Molly flushed harder.

"Can we not talk about it?" she answered. She crossed her arms and looked away, clearly embarrassed. Will knew he shouldn't needle her about it. There were many reasons to see Reba; she was skilled with herbs that cured ailments, prevented pregnancy (or assisted with it), poultices to help with aches and pains of the body, and brews for both sleep and concentration.

But the primary reason young men and woman Will and Molly's age went to see her was her tonic for true love. Molly was recently engaged. Will smiled at her, finding himself momentarily distracted from Hannibal.

And then the force of his own loss hit him once more and his smile disappeared.

"I don't see how she could help."

Despite it being her suggestion, Molly didn't look hopeful either. She shrugged. "Maybe not. *Probably* not*,"* she corrected in answer to Will's scowl. "But she lost the man she loved too. She'd be someone to talk to."

Will was not the type to talk to anyone. He sighed and agreed to think about it.

*

Two days later he was outside Reba's small home. After hesitating at the edge of the wood, he strode purposefully toward the door, only to have it open in front of him.

"What took you so long?" Reba stood in the door with a hand on her hip, staring at Will. Or at least, staring in his direction. Reba had lost her sight when she was small, but you'd never have known it from meeting her. And even know, Will felt the force of her attention. She might not have had sight, but he was certain she saw him none the less. He swallowed and stepped forward. Reba moved back from the door, gesturing for him to come inside.

Will took a seat at the small table. It was where Reba conducted all of her business, and the only place in her home to sit. She had a fire going and hung a kettle over it.

"You've come about your lover."

Will flushed. "He - no. Uh, Hannibal wasn't my lover."

"No?" Reba raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Will said, looking at his hands and wishing he had somewhere else to direct his attention. Reba placed her right hand over his.

“There’s no need for embarrassment here.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Will muttered, to which Reba raised another eyebrow. It was true, though - Will wasn’t embarrassed. At least, not for the reasons people thought. “I didn’t know. He was my friend and I … we never got the chance to be lovers,” he finished.

Reba squeezed his hand. “Frances and I never got the time we should have either,” she said quietly. Then she stood, retrieving the kettle. She had dried and drying herbs hanging from her ceiling, and she pulled a variety of them to toss into the tea before setting the kettle on the table before them. Will watched her, unsure what to say. She looked back at him. Her eyes were unfocused, but her attention was clearly on him.

Several long minutes later Reba poured them tea and Will sipped it gingerly. It had an earthy flavor with the clean hint of mint and something Will couldn’t identify.

Hannibal would have known all the ingredients, he thought with a small smile.

“I don’t know if you can get Hannibal back,” Reba said, cutting through the quiet and cutting to the chase. “My Francis is lost.”

Her tone was matter of fact, but Will felt the pain behind it. She was still looking at him with her sightless eyes, seeing more of him that anyone else had. Or so Will felt. He felt warm beneath her gaze. She sighed and continued. “The dark does not take merely anyone. It has a sentience. When it came for Hannibal it came far out of it’s normal hunting area.”

Will sipped his tea. It was good; the hot beverage warmed and relaxed him. “That part of the woods should have been safe.”

“Should have been,” Reba agreed. She was scrutinizing him. “I’m surprised it hasn’t come for you. It must still be recovering.”

“For me?” Will asked.

Reba’s grin was wide. “It appreciates a certain type of person. Something I think you have not admitted to yourself.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Will said softly. Reba considered him and when she spoke again her tone was softer.

“No, I don’t think you do. But you will come to understand, if you are to retrieve Hannibal.”

And Francis, Will thought. She wouldn’t say it; but if he could he would. Aloud, he asked: “What do I have to do?”

“There’s almost nothing left of what it once was but the darkness,” Reba said. She focused on him. It was an eerie feeling, knowing that she could not see him - and yet her eyes met his

all the same. “To destroy it you must find what is left. The dark heart of the beast, in the dead of the woods. Find it, and kill it.”

Chapter End Notes

Assuming I continue these prompts, and I would like to, but I haven't managed to finish a full set my last several tries, I have a few other obligations I really need to focus on (I paused these to make sure I had my last OWF fic done, but I need to work on finishing zine and holiday exchange items), and you know, the holidays and LIFE and all that, but assuming I do this story I actually plan on continuing in another prompt ... wish me luck.

/crazy run-on sentence.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!